PS for 7/26/90

The Spending is More Obscene Than the Art

The picture in the advertisement caught my eye, as of course it was intended to do. The visual of that courageous Chinese student facing down the tanks in Tiananmen Square is always a grabber.

But the text was downright ridiculous. It conjured up the threat that we will soon all be mowed down by military tanks driven by Senator Jess Helms unless you call a certain phone number today to send a prewritten wire to Congressmen demanding that they vote more taxpayer funds for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA).

Those who attend a concert or play at the Kennedy Center in Washington or a New York theater this summer find that their programs include a propaganda flier showing a picture of Michelangelo's great statue of David with a screaming sign across his middle reading "Banned in the U.S.A.?" The flier is a bare-faced like: "David" stands in a museum in Florence, Italy, and Congress has no say-so over David at all.

People for the American Way (PAW), colloquially known as People for Norman Lear's Way, has launched an extravagant smear campaign against the free speech rights of those who don't want their tax dollars spent for obscene or sacrilegious pictures and shows. In PAW's view, the First Amendment should protect the flow of tax dollars to those who speak, write, draw, photograph, or do obscene things, but not to those who object.

Playing on the assumption that public opinion polls are the magic persuader in politics, PAW commissioned a poll on the NEA-obscene art controversy and, naturally, came up with the conclusion that John Q. Public and Joe Lunchbucket are eager to be taxed in order to finance welfare payments to would-be artists who can't sell their wares on the free market. As any respectable pollster knows, you can get any answer you want by the way you ask the questions, so let's look at the questions on the PAW survey.

The PAW poll asked: "Do you think government funding to avant-garde or leading-edge artists should be stopped because a few people feel their work is controversial?" Based on this question, PAW claims that 62 percent of Americans approve of unrestricted tax-funding for the NEA.

But here is how the question **should** have been asked: Do you think that a government agency should be allowed to spend your tax dollars for photos of a crucifix in a jar of urine, or for one man urinating into the mouth of another, or for men engaged in sadomasochistic acts, or for live sex shows on stage, or for child pornography? It would be hard to find anyone answering yes to that question except the characters who received the handouts, but the NEA, in fact, did fund those obscenities.

The PAW poll asked **who** should decide which NEA projects are funded, and 90 percent of those surveyed rejected the notion that the NEA "should be run by politicians instead of artists, experts and other citizens." Now, admittedly, politicians (especially Congressmen) are held in low repute today, but the "artists and experts" who have been making the decisions about who gets government art money would rank even lower on the scale if the public knew what they had done.

Here are four examples of "art" which were unanimously recommended for grants of taxpayer's money by two levels of "artists and experts" in a system known as "peer review": (1) Karen Finley, who appears on stage with her nude body coated with chocolate and decorated with candy and tinsel; (2) John Fleck, who urinates on stage into a toilet bowl containing a picture of Jesus Christ; (3) Holly Hughes, who does a solo performance about lesbian desire, including blasphemous imagery about Jesus and His Mother; and (4) Tim Miller, who appears in political homosexual performances.

The NEA commission did reject these four grants, but only after two peer panels of "artists and experts" had unanimously approved them. All four of these "artists" had received previous NEA grants. When the **Washington Post** interviewed them, they cried around about being "censored" and one of them bemoaned that now "I have to get a job."

The issue is not censorship but sponsorship. Nobody is stopping these weirdo performances or people who want to pay money to see them. But there is no reason why the rest of us should have to pay for them. The whole system of Congress writing checks on OUR bank account to pay for "art" selected by the "peers" of handout-hunters who produce stuff like the above, is an outrage.

Now Congress wants to raise taxes to pay for this and other deficit-spending boondoggles. That is the biggest obscenity.